

Situational Functional Linguistics in Japanese Senior High Schools

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Abstract

This essay briefly summarizes the first day of Dr. Mickan's workshop. Then this paper discusses the possibility of using Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) in Japanese senior high schools. I also introduce two examples of using SFL, which are analysis of parts of speech and clauses, focusing on functions of language. Understanding and using SFL in the classroom will bring forth new ideas about learning and teaching language.

Summary of seminar

When learning a language, people tend to memorize vocabulary and grammar. Of course, this is an important process especially when learning a second language, but the notion of SFL is that this process is only a part of learning a second language. Dr. Mickan showed us an example, pointing to a pen on a table: *What is this? This is a pen.* As you know, this kind of sample conversation is often used at the junior high school level. After showing this example, Dr. Mickan questioned how much this kind of conversation has actually taken place in our daily life. We can see the thing we are talking about and probably easily recognize that the thing is a pen. This interaction must be created just for grammatical practice. In the theory of SFL, however, language or text has always something to do with context. Although it depends on a context, learning grammar at the sentence level is not always necessary. What learners or teachers should consider is whether the texts they use are authentic and communicative.

Possibility of SFL in senior high school

The traditional pedagogies used in Japanese language teaching classrooms tend to emphasize grammatical acquisition at the word or sentence level without giving its social context. As is often criticized, English language teachers still teach grammar at the word or sentence level. What students learn in a classroom is English sentence structures. This is because most senior high school students prepare for entrance examinations to enter a university. Some teachers still think that the grammar-translation method is valuable for teaching English for examinations.

From my experience, I have taught third year high school students for two years and felt that teaching English for entrance examination is not so inefficient. There is great possibility to learn and acquire English. However, I am always concerned with the function of language in a text and try not to let students memorize words, phrases, or sentences out of context, which is completely different from the grammar-translation method. As Mican (2004) states the grammar-translation method has no social context and it limits the usage of grammar between written and spoken English. Butt et al. (2000) also argue that learning language is more than learning vocabulary and grammar.

Learning a language involves learning how to use the language in a way that makes sense to other people who speak the language. For example, even if the students have excellent grammatical knowledge, they cannot produce a perfect text such as an argumentative essay without a good understanding of the purpose of the texts and a generic structure of the text. In other words, learners need to know the function of the language (Halliday, 1985). Thus, teachers have to keep in mind that language should not be taught at the word or sentence level without its context.

Functional grammar and text-based pedagogy for entrance exam prep

As mentioned above, functional grammar looks at a text in its context. Thus, when learning English, we cannot ignore the fact that grammar is deeply related to texts and contexts. Butt et al. (2000) define grammar as “the way in which a language is organized” (p.22). Although some teachers can understand this concept, it might be difficult to know how effective it is and how they can employ this theory. Therefore, at the end of the essay, I introduce some teaching examples which can be used for high school students.

Parts of speech

The most effective way to introduce SFL in English classes is to analyze texts. First of all, students identify the parts of speech and then separate them into groups, such as noun groups, verbal groups, prepositional groups, conjunction groups, and adverbial groups. Then, they look at the modifiers and think of their function (Table 1).

Table 1. Examples of Identifying Parts of Speech.

They	look	at the modifiers
Noun group	Verbal group	Prepositional group

This analysis is closely related to traditional grammar, so that both students and teachers should be familiar. From my teaching experience at high schools, identifying and

understanding the functions of parts of speech are important for preparing examinations. Although some students can identify parts of speech, most of them cannot tell their functions, especially when it comes to adverbial groups and adjective groups. However, by knowing the functions in a text, my students' understanding has been enhanced. They also understand the use of infinitive phrases and relative clauses. This analysis is a start to functional grammar but it is worth doing it especially for beginners who do not understand the functions of language.

Clause analysis

Another way of using SFL for senior high school students is clause analysis. Many study guides sold for senior high school students already have slash marks, but most students still have difficulty in marking slashes by themselves. I suppose that this is because they do not know what a clause is. A clause is a fundamental linguistic structure to communicate with each other, so that students should know how they are composed. As an example (Table 2 and 3), we will first look at a text and then break the text into clauses. The text and analysis are adapted from my Master's dissertation.

Table 2. Example Text

Before the study, I had few assumptions related with this topic. For example, the aim of the assessment of musculoskeletal systems is to check muscle strength, range of motion, and joint and muscle condition.
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Table 3. Example of Clause Analysis

1. <u>Before the study,</u> <u>I</u> <u>had</u> <u>few assumptions</u> <u>[related]</u> <u>with this topic]</u>
2. For example, <u>the aim of the assessment of musculoskeletal system</u> <u>is]</u>
3. <u>[to check]</u> <u>muscle strength, range of motion, and joint and muscle condition.</u>

Participant---Straight underline

Process---Boxed

Circumstance---Wavy underline

From this analysis we can see the writer's expression of her experience in terms of the things, events, and happenings of her world. As a participant, the writer is involved in this text, and what she is studying is also involved. Although this analysis is only a part of whole analysis, we can recognize how it functions to make meaning in a text.

The two SFL analyses I have shown is only the beginning of this theory. However, I believe that these two analyses are useful to think about grammar in terms of patterns and functions and to deal with the grammar of whole texts in context.

Conclusion

Developing grammatical knowledge is developing communicative tools in terms of language. Not just memorizing grammatical rules but understanding how language works should be taught, and for this it is said that SFL is one of the most effective methods.

The advantage of using functional grammar in classes is not only working with texts in context but also considering the language they use. In order to analyze a text, students have to use their brain, and thus they are active participants in the classroom. They are not just listening to teacher's explanation, taking notes, and solving unauthentic problems. In an English classroom, most high school students rarely read authentic texts because they prepare for entrance examinations, and it is true that this is one of the things which maintain students' motivation for learning English.

However, learning a language is more than that. As a language teacher, I believe that I have to teach how interesting it is to use a variety of vocabularies and grammars and their effects in communicating with other people. SFL, which I introduced in this essay, is scratching the surface of whole theory, but worth exploring. If some teachers become interested in this theory and use it, language teaching in high schools will develop.

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